

Vulnerability of migrant workers hits new low

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Labour Party Policy Council Member Priyanca Radhakrishnan has a point.

An increasing number of migrant workers subsist under despicable working and living conditions, which is no less or more than slavery.

Short of being physically beaten, their life, if reports are to be believed, is on the brink of collapse, belying the fairness for which New Zealand is renowned the world over.

Priyanca's article, 'Exploitation of migrant workers tantamount to slavery' under **Businesslink** is a must read.

Exploitation of migrant workers and international students is nothing new in countries, which depend on migration for its economic progress. Britain, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have laws that prescribe minimum wages, working and living conditions and rights of migrants on work permits.

Silent sufferers

Yet, they suffer in silence a variety of atrocities- working long hours, accepting less pay, often by cash, allowing their employers to evade tax and even immigration laws.

They suffer in silence to avoid loss of jobs, and worse, deportation.

A large number of them come from India and most of them are exploited by employers of Indian origin.

We not only need good laws but also their effective enforcement.

We need laws that are responsible but humane.

It is a pity that many migrant workers falling a prey to exploitation do not have their papers in order. In essence, they arrive here on visit visas, hoping that their employers or agents would regularise and legalise their stay.

Robust process

There is no argument against a smart, quick and efficient immigration regime, and strengthened border controls. There cannot be any cry against tightened curbs on hiring of illegal workers, requiring most businesses to verify employees against an electronic database of those allowed to work.

But there is a need for a regime that is tough on erring employers – those exploiting the helpless situation of migrant workers and international students.

Such a regime would also educate foreigners on their rights and the ways and means of redressing their grievances.

Abuse elsewhere

Though questionable, New Zealand could seek little comfort in hearing that the condition of migrant workers under reference here is far better in this country than it is in nations which depend on foreign workers to fill most job vacancies.

An **Economist** leader said that Sweden and Norway, where migrants can use public services, claim welfare benefits and bring in dependents, admit relatively few purely economic migrants.

"This trade-off is visible even within the European Union, where the recent accession of 12 relatively poor eastern European countries has sparked a debate about migrants' rights to welfare," it said.

About two years ago, David Cameron, Britain's former Prime Minister, clashed with his Oxford contemporary Radek Sikorski, Poland's Foreign Minister.

Mr Cameron wanted to exclude recently arrived European immigrants from welfare and public housing.

"If Britain gets our taxpayers, shouldn't it also pay their benefits?" Mr Sikorski asked.

Britain's exit from the European Union is likely to change the equation.

Bilateral Agreements

Elsewhere the movement of people is increasingly regulated by bilateral agreements and diplomacy.

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David McKenzie, a Lead Economist of the Development Research Group at the World Bank said that since a diaspora can help poor countries develop, sending states must try to protect the rights of migrant workers without making them such a burden as to be unwelcome.

Receiving countries weigh their national interests, real or perceived, against international obligation calculations vary from country to country.

Back to the home turf, New Zealand should have a better system of immigration, screening of migrant workers, and more importantly, a stringent legal system that does not fail to punish those exploiting migrant workers.

No one should be allowed to live or work here illegally. On the same count, no one should be allowed to misuse and exploit migrant workers and international students.

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